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TEXTS FOR STUDENTS, No. 25

BABYLONIAN  
PENITENTIAL PSALMS

PERCY HANDCOCK, M.A.

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# **BABYLONIAN PENITENTIAL PSALMS**

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## INTRODUCTION

IN the penitential psalms the religious beliefs of the Babylonians and Assyrians attain their ethical zenith. The term "penitential psalms" is, of course, purely general; but in view of the striking similarity which some of these compositions bear to certain Biblical psalms, both in tone and sometimes even in phraseology, the term on the whole constitutes a fairly apt designation of those Assyrian and Babylonian religious texts in which the keynote is a consciousness of sin and shortcoming on the part of the suppliant coupled with an appeal to a deity or deities for absolution.

We are chiefly indebted to Ashurbanipal's library at Nineveh for the preservation of this branch of literature. This library had existed in a humble form from the days of Sargon, King of Assyria from 722 to 705 B.C., but in the reign of Ashurbanipal (668 to 626 B.C.) it was greatly extended and enlarged. This king dispatched scribes to other cities in Babylonia and Assyria where libraries existed, and procured copies for his own library at Nineveh. Thus it is that a very large proportion of the cuneiform inscriptions recovered from Ashurbanipal's library are copies of earlier documents.

Professor Jastrow is of opinion that penitential psalms formed part of the religious literature of the Babylonians as early as 2,000 B.C., but that it is very doubtful if any of those preserved go back to that date.

The pervading characteristic of these texts is the anxiety of the suppliant to assuage the anger of the deity. Whether such anger was well merited or not was irrelevant.

The hard fact that some misfortune had befallen the suppliant irresistibly argued the anger of the deity as the cause thereof; hence the necessity of appeasing that anger in order to avert further disaster. To accomplish this end the mediation of the priest is required to support and reinforce the petitioner's appeal. Thus we find that, as in the incantation texts it was the duty and privilege of the priest to instruct the layman as to the appropriate formula to be used, the recitation of which was accompanied with an appeal of the priest, so in the psalms the priest instructs the penitent what to say, and himself supplements the confession with an assurance of his client's sincerity, and an earnest request that the prayer for forgiveness be granted.

So pronounced, indeed, was this idea in regard to the necessity of a mediator among the Babylonians and Assyrians that sometimes the son or servant of the god himself played that essential part in the drama.

In the penitential psalms the suppliant, in many cases, was probably the king, as the disasters and misfortunes to which reference is made are of a national rather than personal character, and thus incidentally these texts form an exception to the otherwise more or less true generalisation that the Babylonian and Assyrian kings of those days, according to their own annals, never sustained a check or suffered a defeat.

P. H.

# BABYLONIAN PENITENTIAL PSALMS

(I)<sup>1</sup>

O that the anger of my lord's heart would be pacified !  
O that the god who is unknown would be pacified !  
O that the goddess who is unknown would be pacified !  
O that the god known or unknown would be pacified !  
O that the goddess known or unknown would be pacified !  
O that the heart of my god would be pacified !  
O that the heart of my goddess would be pacified !  
O that the god or goddess known or unknown would be  
pacified !  
O that the god who is wroth with me would be pacified !  
O that the goddess who is wroth with me would be pacified !  
The sin which I have committed I know not,  
My misdeeds I know not.  
May my god name a favourable name !  
May my goddess name a favourable name !  
May the god known or unknown name a favourable name !  
May the goddess known or unknown name a favourable  
name !  
Clean food have I . . . eaten,  
Clear water have I . . . drunk.  
The unclean . . . , my god, have I unwittingly eaten,  
Upon the impure . . . , my goddess, have I unwittingly  
trodden.

<sup>1</sup> The text is published in Rawlinson, iv. (2nd ed.), Pl. 10, and transliterated and translated by Zimmern in *Babylonische Busspsalmen*, pp. 61 ff. See also Jastrow, *Die Religion Babyloniens und Assyriens*, ii., pp. 101 ff.

O lord, my sins are many, great are my transgressions,  
 O my god, my sins are many, great are my transgressions,  
 O my goddess, my sins are many, great are my transgressions,  
 O god, known or unknown, my sins are many, great are my transgressions,  
 O goddess, known or unknown, my sins are many, great are my transgressions.

The sins I have committed I know not.

The transgressions which I have committed I know not.

The unclean that I have eaten I know not.

The impure on which I have trodden I know not.

\* \* \* \* \*

The lord in the anger of his heart has looked on me,  
 The god in the fury of his heart has encompassed me.  
 The goddess who has become angry with me and brought me into pain,

A god, known or unknown, has oppressed me.

A goddess, known or unknown, has brought sorrow upon me.

I sought for help, but no one took me by the hand,

I wept, but no one came to my side,

I broke forth into lamentations, but no one hearkened unto me.

Full of sorrow, I am overpowered and cannot look up.

To my compassionate god I turn, proclaiming my sorrow.

The feet of my goddess I kiss, and . . .

To the god, known or unknown, I proclaim my sorrow.

To the goddess, known or unknown, I proclaim my sorrow.

O lord, look upon me, accept my sighing !

O goddess, look upon me, accept my sighing !

O god, known or unknown, . . .

O goddess, known or unknown, . . .

How long, my god . . .

How long, my goddess . . .

O god, known or unknown, may thy angered heart be  
pacified!

O goddess, known or unknown, may thy angered heart be  
pacified!

Mankind is perverse, and no one has understanding.

Among all who are, who knows anything?

Whether they do evil or good, no one has knowledge.

O lord, do not cast aside thy servant.

Prostrate in the watery morass he lies, take hold of his  
hand!

The sins which I have committed, change to grace!

The transgressions which I have committed, let the wind  
carry away!

My many iniquities, tear asunder like a garment!

My god, my sins are seven times seven, forgive me my sins!

My goddess, my sins are seven times seven, forgive me my  
sins!

O god, known or unknown, my sins are seven times seven,  
forgive me my sins!

O goddess, known or unknown, my sins are seven times  
seven, forgive me my sins!

Forgive me my sins, and I will humble myself before thee.

May thy heart be pacified, as the heart of the mother that  
has given birth!

May thy heart be pacified as that of a mother who has  
given birth, as that of a father who has begotten a  
child!

(II) <sup>1</sup>A "PRAYER OF THE RAISING OF THE HAND"  
TO ISHTAR

I pray unto thee, lady of ladies, goddess of goddesses,  
 O Ishtar, queen of all men, directress of mankind.  
 O Irnini,<sup>2</sup> O exalted one, mistress of the Igigi,  
 Thou art mighty, thou hast sovereign power, exalted is thy  
 name!  
 Thou art the light of heaven and earth, O valiant daughter  
 of Sin.  
 Bearing arms, establishing battle!  
 Framing all decrees, wearing the crown of dominion!  
 O lady, majestic is thy rank, exalted above all the gods!  
 Star of lamentation, who makest hostility among brethren  
 who are at peace,  
 Making them abandon friendship,  
 For a friend. O lady of defeat, who disturbs my peace,  
 O Gushea, who art girt with battle, who art clothed with  
 terror,  
 Thou dost perfect destiny and decision, the law of earth  
 and heaven.

<sup>1</sup> The text is published and translated by L. W. King, *The Seven Tablets of Creation*, vol. i., pp. 222 f., ii., Plates 75 f.; Zimmern, *Hymnen*, pp. 19 f.; Dhorme, *Choix de Textes Religieux Assyro-Babyloniens*, pp. 356 f.; Jastrow, *Die Religion Babylonien und Assyrien*, ii., pp. 66 f.; Ungnad in Gressmann, *Altorientalische Texte und Bilder*, i., pp. 85 f.; and most recently by R. W. Rogers in his monumental work, *Cuneiform Parallels to the Old Testament*, pp. 153 f.

<sup>2</sup> Ishtar, to whom the prayer is offered, is identified here with Irnini, and later on with Gushea. In course of time the Babylonians and Assyrians acquired the habit of identifying Ishtar with other goddesses, whose attributes and titles she assumed, and whose independent importance she tended to eclipse. Other examples of goddesses with whom Ishtar was identified are: Nanâ, Anunitum, and Bêlit.

Sanctuaries, shrines, divine dwellings, and temples worship thee !

Where is thy name not [heard] ? Where not thy decrees ?  
Where are thy images not made ? Where art thy temples  
not founded ?

Where art thou not great ? Where art thou not exalted ?  
Anu, Enlil, and Ea have exalted thee, among the gods have  
they increased thy dominion.

They have exalted thee among the Igigi, they have made  
thy place great.

At the thought of thy name the heaven and earth quake,  
The gods tremble, the Anunaki falter.

Mighty is thy name, mankind payeth homage thereto,  
For thou art great, and thou art exalted.

All the black-headed race, all mankind, adore thy power.  
Thou judgest the cause of men with justice and  
righteousness ;

Thou regardest with mercy the despised man, thou settest  
right the downtrodden every morning.

How long wilt thou tarry, O lady of heaven and earth,  
shepherdess of pale-faced men ?

How long wilt thou tarry, O lady of the holy E-anna, the  
pure storehouse ?

How long wilt thou tarry, O lady whose feet are unwearied,  
whose knees are vigorous ?

How long wilt thou tarry, O lady of conflict and all battles ?  
O thou glorious one, that ragest among the Igigi, that  
subduest angry gods,

That hast power over all princes, that holdest the sceptre  
of kings,

That openest the bonds of all handmaids,

That art raised on high, that art firmly established—

O valiant Ishtar, great is thy might !

Brilliant torch of heaven and earth, light of all dwellings,  
Terrible in the fight, without a rival, strong in battle !

Flame that roarest against the foe, and cuttest off the mighty !

O furious Ishtar, summoner of armies !

O goddess of men, O goddess of women, whose counsel none may learn !

Where thou dost regard, the dead lives, the sick arises.

The unjust becomes just when he beholdeth thy face !

I, thy servant, sorrowful, sighing, suffering, invoke thee.

Look upon me, O my lady, accept my supplication.

In truth pity me, and hearken unto my prayer.

Speak deliverance unto me, let thy soul be appeased !

Deliverance for my suffering body, full of troubles and disorders !

Deliverance for my afflicted heart, full of sorrow and sighing !

Deliverance for my suffering bowels, troubled and confused !

Deliverance for my troubled house, full of lamentation !

Deliverance for my spirit, full of sorrow and sighing !

O . . . Irnini, fierce lioness, may thy heart be appeased !

Raging wild ox, may thy heart be appeased !

May thine eyes rest with favour upon me !

In thy glorious appearance, in truth look upon me !

Put an end to the evil bewitchments of my body ; let me behold thy clear light !

How long, O my lady, shall mine enemies persecute me ?

How long shall they devise evil in rebellion and wickedness,

My persecutor, my pursuer, shall spy after me ?

How long, O my lady, shall the crippled and diseased seek me ?

He hath prepared me a mourner's garment, but I appear joyfully before thee.

The weak have become strong, but I am weak.

I am troubled like a flood which the evil wind maketh to rage (?).

My heart hath taken wing, and hath flown away like a  
bird of the heavens.

I moan like a dove, night and day.

I am made desolate, and I weep bitterly.

With grief and woe my soul is distressed.

What have I done, O my god and my goddess?

Is it because I feared not my god or my goddess that  
trouble hath befallen me?

Sickness, headache, ruin, and destruction are come upon me;

Troubles, turning away of the countenance, and fulness of  
anger are my lot,

Indignation, wrath, anger of gods and men.

I behold, O my lady, days of affliction, months of sorrow,  
years of misfortune;

I behold, O my lady, judgment of disorder and violence.

Death and misery make an end of me.

Desolate is my sanctuary, my shrine is desolate;

Over my house, my gate, and my fields is affliction poured  
forth.

As for my god, his face is turned elsewhere;

My family is scattered, my walls are broken into.

But unto my lady do I give heed, my ear is turned  
toward her;

My prayer is unto thee, dissolve my ban!

Dissolve my sin, my fault, my mockery, and my offence!

Forgive my mockery, accept my supplication!

Free my breast, send me comfort!

Guide my footsteps, that happily and proudly among the  
living I may pursue my way!

Speak the word, that at thy command the angry god may  
be favourable,

And that the goddess, who is angry, may be gracious!

My gloomy, smoking brazier may shine,

My quenched torch may be relighted.

May my scattered family be collected!

May the fold be wide, and the enclosures spacious !  
 Receive the abasement of my countenance, give ear unto  
     my prayer,  
 In truth look upon me favourably, and [*accept my*  
     *supplication*] !  
 How long, O my lady, wilt thou be angry, and thy face be  
     turned away ?  
 How long, O my lady, wilt thou rage, and thy soul be in  
     anger ?  
 Incline thy neck, which [is turned] away, let a word of  
     grace be before thy face ;  
 As by the solving waters of the river, may thy soul be  
     dissolved !  
 My oppressors, may I trample them like the clay ;  
 And they that are wroth with me, subdue them, and crush  
     them beneath my feet !  
 Let my prayer and supplication come unto thee,  
 And let thy great mercy be upon me,  
 That they who see me in the street may magnify thy name,  
 And I will glorify thy godhead and thy might before men.  
 Ishtar is exalted ! Ishtar is queen !  
 The lady is exalted ! The lady is queen !  
 Irrini, the valiant daughter of Sin, hath no rival.

### PRAYER OF THE RAISING OF THE HAND TO ISHTAR

This is the (magical) ritual ; thou shalt kneel at the foot, a  
     green bow shalt thou sprinkle with pure water ; four  
     bricks *sahhu* shalt thou set up ;  
 A lamb shalt thou take ; with sarbatu-wood 'shalt thou fill  
     [the *censer*], and thou shalt set fire [thereto] ; sweet-  
     scented unguents, fine meal (?) and some cypress-wood,  
 Shalt thou heap thereon ; a drink-offering shalt thou offer,  
     but thou shalt not bow thyself down. This incanta-

tion before the goddess Ishtar. Three times shalt thou recite . . . and thou shalt not look behind thee.

Incantation. "O exalted Ishtar, that givest light unto the four quarters of the world."

[This] copy from Borsippa, like unto its archetype, has Nergal-balätsu-ikbi, the son of Atarad-kalme, magician, Written for [the preservation of] his life, and has revised it, and deposited it in the temple of E-sagila.<sup>1</sup>

(III)<sup>2</sup>

O my god, who art angry with me, turn [thy face?] towards me!

O my goddess, who viewest me with displeasure, receive my prayer!

Receive my prayer! Let thy soul be pacified!

O my lord, forgiving and merciful,

Who guidest the span of life and softenest death, receive my supplication!

O my goddess, look favourably upon me, accept my prayer!

May my sins be absolved, and my misdeeds forgotten!

May the evil spell be broken and the fetters loosened!

May my sighing be carried away by the seven winds!

Let me rend asunder the evil, let the bird take it away to heaven!

May the fish take off my trouble, let the stream bear it away!

May the beasts of the field carry it away from me, and wash it away in flowing water!

Make me bright like a golden cord (?)!

<sup>1</sup> I.e., the Temple of Marduk in Babylon.

<sup>2</sup> The text is published in Rawlinson, iv. (2nd ed.), 59, No. 2. transliterated and translated by Zimmern, *Busspsalmen*, No. 9.

As the brilliance of a — stone may I be of value  
before thee!

Remove the evil, protect my life, so shall I protect thy fore-  
court, and set up thy image (?).

Let the evil depart from me, so that I may be preserved  
with thee!

Let me have a propitious dream,  
The dream which I dream, may it be propitious, yea,  
established be the dream which I dream!

The dream which I dream, turn it to good.

May the god Maḥir, the god of dreams, stand at my head!

Let me enter E-sagila, the temple of the gods, the house  
of life!

To Marduk, the merciful and compassionate, into his  
merciful hands deliver me!

So shall I do homage to thy greatness and extol thy  
godhead!

May the dwellers in my city glorify thy might

. . . may mankind extol thee!

(IV)<sup>1</sup>

How long, O my mistress, will the mighty foe oppress  
thy land?

In thy chief city Erech drought has settled

In E-ul-maš, the house of thine oracle, blood is poured out  
like water.

Throughout thy land he has kindled conflagrations, and  
poured fire out like a column.

O my mistress, I am fast bound to misfortune,

O my mistress, thou hast beset me, and hast brought sick-  
ness upon me,

The mighty enemy has trodden me down as a reed.

<sup>1</sup> The text is published in Rawlinson, iv. (2nd ed.), 19, No. 3, and transliterated and translated by Zimmern, *Busspsalmen*, No. 5, p. 74; and see Jastrow, *Die Religion Babylonien und Assyrien*, ii., p. 96.

I have no judgment, I have no wisdom.  
Like a marsh (?) I wail day and night.  
I, thy servant, beseech thee,  
May thy heart be at rest, thy soul pacified!  
Give ear to my wailing, let thy soul be pacified!  
[Accept my prayer], let thy soul be pacified!  
Look mercifully upon me, turn thy face towards me

(V)<sup>1</sup>

. . . the downcast countenance of the creature!  
I, thy servant, full of sighs, cry unto thee,  
The supplication of him who has sinned do thou accept!  
If thou lookest upon a man, that man lives.  
O almighty one, mistress of mankind,  
Merciful one, to whom it is good to turn, receive my  
prayer!

[*The Priest here takes up the strain, and joins his prayer to  
that of the Penitent.*]

His god and his goddess being wroth with him, he turns  
to thee.

Thy countenance turn towards him, seize his hand!

[*The Penitent continues.*]

Beside thee, there is no guiding deity.  
With tender mercy look upon me, and receive my prayer!  
Proclaim: "When at last"—and may thy soul be  
appeased!

How long, O my mistress! Turn thy face towards me!  
Like doves I lament, I satiate myself with sighs.

[*The Priest again takes up the Penitent's prayer.*]

With pain and ache his soul is full of sighs,  
Tears he weeps, he breaks forth into wailing.

<sup>1</sup> The text is published in Rawlinson, iv. (2nd ed.), 29, No. 5, and transliterated and translated by Zimmermann, *Busspsalmen*, No. 1, p. 9; and see Jastrow, *Die Religion Babyloniens und Assyriens*, ii., p. 96.

(VI)<sup>1</sup>

Prayer was my rule, sacrificing my law,  
 The day of worship of my god my joy,  
 The day of devotion to my gods my profit and gain.

What, however, seems good to one, to a god may be displeasing.

What is spurned by oneself may find favour with a god.  
 Who is there that can grasp the will of the gods in heaven?

The plan of a god is full of mystery—who can understand it?

How can mortals learn the ways of a god?

He who is still alive at evening is dead the next morning.

In an instant he is cast into grief, of a sudden he is crushed.

This moment he sings and plays,

In a twinkling he wails like a mourner.

Like opening and closing,<sup>2</sup> mankind's spirit changes.

If they hunger, they are like corpses.

Have they been satiated, they consider themselves a rival to their god.

If things go well, they prate of mounting to heaven.

If they are in distress, they speak of descending into Irkallu.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This is only an extract from a very long psalm, the text of which is published in Rawlinson, iv. (2nd ed.), 60, and a complete translation and study of which is given by Jastrow in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. xxv., pp. 135-191, and see Jastrow, *Die Religion Babyloniens und Assyriens*, ii., 121-133; Martin, "Le Juste Souffrant Babylonien," in the *Journal Asiat.*, 10th série, vol. xvi., pp. 75-143, and Landersdorfer, *Eine Babylonische Quelle für das Buch Job*.

<sup>2</sup> I.e., like day and night.

<sup>3</sup> One of the names of the lower world where the dead congregate.

